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'I'm shouting a warning as loud as I can' — 'Humans are a catastrophe for the Earth'

The Oscar-winning 'eco-James Bond' has made a new film — and we are all the villains, he tells India Sturgis

By **The Telegraph**
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The Oscar-winning 'eco-James Bond' has made a new film — and we are all the villains, he tells India Sturgis

Thirty years ago, Louie Psihoyos watched as two young children were killed a few steps in front of him. On a blue-sky day near a market in Perkiomen, Pennsylvania, he noticed a family walking hand-in-hand beside the road ahead. A large van swept past and he saw that one of its giant wing mirrors would hit one of the

children as it tore past. Psihoyos shouted, but it was too little too late. Both children were dragged beneath the van's wheels and crushed.

Top five species the World Wildlife Fund lists as critically endangered

South China Tiger – fewer than 10 left

1 In the 1950s, the South China Tiger population was estimated at around 4,000, but thousands were killed as the tigers were once seen as pests. Scientists say the tiger is "functionally extinct" as it has not been sighted in the wild for more than 25 years.

Javan Rhino – 60 left

2 There are still major gaps in our knowledge about Javan rhinos because they are extremely difficult to study. The remaining Javan rhinos live in incredibly dense jungle and the species has never bred in captivity.

Amur Leopard – 60 left

3 These leopards live in the forests and hilly terrain of Amur-Heilong in Asia. They are astonishingly quick and can reach 60 km/h.

Sumatran Rhino – 100 left

4 Sumatran rhinos are the smallest of the living rhinoceroses and the only Asian rhino with two horns. Numbers are thought to have at least halved between 1985 and 1995.

Vaquita – 100 left

5 The Vaquita, endemic to Mexico's Gulf of California, is the smallest and most endangered small marine cetacean. Fishing, being caught in nets aimed at fish and a reduction of food supplies because of overfishing threaten this species.

SOURCE: WWF

"They died right in front of me," says the 58-year-old, Oscar-winning filmmaker, his moss-green eyes stretching in

TRENDING

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incredulity.

“I have had to live with the idea that I didn’t scream loud enough. I didn’t do enough. I could have changed that family’s life. Because I was too weak, I didn’t do enough that day and I’ve had to live with it. I don’t want to live with the idea I’m not doing enough now.”

It’s an arresting story, one that drove him to spend five years making his new documentary, Racing Extinction. In it, Psihoyos and scientists explain how man’s impact on the Earth is driving a new mass extinction, killing species at 1,000 times the background rate (the normal rate of extinction throughout the Earth’s history), and that within 100 years half of the world’s species will be extinct.

“When you think of mass extinction, you think of a catastrophe, like the meteor that killed the dinosaurs 65 million years ago,” he says. “This time, humanity is the meteor.”

Psihoyos calls it “the biggest story in the world” and claims the acidification of the ocean (through the absorption of the carbon dioxide that we produce) has already claimed 40 per cent of the world’s plankton, and by 2100 will have dissolved all the coral reef, leading to the extinction of 25 per cent of oceanic species. Earlier this year, he lit up the Empire State building in New York with images of endangered species, a stunt costing $1.3 million that made headlines worldwide and is featured in the film.

Carbon emissions, climate change, overfishing, illegal wildlife trade, habitat destruction and overconsumption are the overwhelming problems and his message is clear: after the frogs, songbirds and turtles, we’ll swiftly follow.

Coming from the man who made The Cove – the 2009 Oscar-winning documentary that exposed the brutal slaughter of dolphins for sushi in Japan – his message is not to be taken lightly. In The Cove, Psihoyos used hidden cameras and covert surveillance techniques to focus attention on Taiji’s annual cull

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of 23,000 dolphins and porpoises. Since it aired, the figure has dropped to 6,000.

“There are arrest warrants out for me in Japan for trespassing, conspiracy to disrupt commerce, photographing undercover cops without permission,” he says, without sounding too bothered.

Racing Extinction broadens the net, tackling Chinese black markets that sell tens of thousands of shark fins and Indonesian fishermen spearing manta rays for their gills (which are used in Chinese medicine). With his carbon-dioxide sensitive cameras, he also points the finger at oil and gas companies: “If The Cove was Oceans 11,” he says, “this is Oceans 12.”

Like The Cove, Psihoyos relies on secret cameras and Hitchcockian suspense sequences, but this time much of the bloody footage was left on the cutting room floor.

“I didn’t want to make a horror film that people revered but didn’t see. There are a lot of people who stand to get hurt by this film, and whose businesses stand to get hurt, I hope. Because what we [humans] are doing is unconscionable.”

Death threats have come his way before from fishermen; does he anticipate a similar response to this?

“I hope so, then you know you are doing good. When we were doing a lot of filming undercover in China it was dangerous. It’s illegal to shoot undercover footage there. We were very happy to get out.”

Good intentions aside, he must get a buzz from stealth missions and his persona as an “eco James Bond”.

“It’s not about making a movie, it is about starting a movement – that’s the big difference to what we are doing. We don’t want to just create awareness, we want people to take action.”

Psihoyos hopes people will feel inspired to “start with one thing” to reduce their environmental impact, from switching to renewable energy to cycling to work or going vegan one day a week. (If all Americans did that, the greenhouse gas emission savings would be equivalent to taking 7.6 million cars off the road.)

“The way to move the needle is to create a tipping point somewhere between 10 and 16.5 per cent of the world’s population. The science says once this number of people has an unwavering belief of a truth, the rest of the population starts to fall like dominos.”

Using imagery as a way to make social change first struck him as a 10-year-old boy doing a paper round in his hometown in Iowa.

“I’d go with my little red wagon down to the print presses on a Sunday morning and watch the papers come off and see the pictures. Our newspaper had a really good photographic department. I just loved pictures and looking at them at 5am on a Sunday morning had a real impact on me.”

He worked for a newspaper until 1980 when, aged 23, he joined National Geographic as a staff photographer. After 17 years circling the globe dozens of times on photographic missions, he began shooting for Fortune magazine and the New York Times, wrote a book on dinosaurs and segued into film-making at roughly the same time he founded the Oceanic Preservation Society (OSP) in 2005.

Psihoyos practises what he preaches, driving an electric car, using solar panels, and eschewing all meat and animal products. (“Raising animals for consumption causes more greenhouse gases than all the emissions from the transportation sector combined,” he says.) His employees are forbidden from keeping meat in the office fridge. “You have to eat it outside, with the smokers.”

I'd go with my little red wagon down to the print presses on a Sunday morning and watch the papers come off and see the pictures

Such a stringent ethical code eventually caused a rift between him and his wife, Viki, a ballet dancer. The couple, who have two children Nicholas, 30, and Sam, 25, divorced last year after she refused to give up meat. Psihoyos was heartbroken, but the separation, he says, was inevitable.

"When you do something this passionately, you want to be surrounded by someone who really understands what you are trying to do. I love her dearly.

"We were great for a certain amount of time, but it was hard to not get support when you spend your whole life, and every molecule in your body, trying to do this work. She wasn't supportive, she was still eating meat. That killed me."

Neither of his sons have fallen in step with their father's eco-zealotry, either. Psihoyos's eldest son is a fisherman in Antigua – "he goes off by himself in a small boat and hand lines for fish" – and his youngest an inventor in San Francisco.

"Sam's working on a billfold [wallet] that has a credit card that shoots out when you push a button. I told him he better hurry: credit cards might go extinct in the next few years, too."

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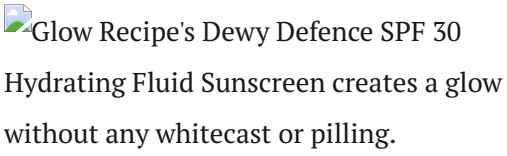

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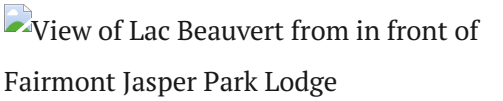
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